

Significant concepts

The rewritten *Evaluating unit planners* rubric document will be published on the OCC in the *Coordinator support material* in August 2010 (see below). Educators are constantly refining and developing understandings. In the same way, the MYP team has evaluated the advice given within the current document published on the OCC in respect of unit planning and developing significant concepts, and have further refined this text.

In the MYP, the significant concept is considered the big idea of the unit that brings focus and depth, and leads students towards enduring understandings. Upon consideration of the subject-specific content and concepts to be taught in an MYP unit, it is very likely that one big idea or concept will emerge. In order to articulate the big idea as a significant concept it is important that teachers understand what constitutes a significant concept in the MYP.

The significant concept(s) identifies the essential understandings that students should retain in the future, and that become the notions and principles applied to solve problems and issues relevant to their lives. Significant concepts are timeless and universal (Erickson 2008), and refer to a big idea that is “an abstract, transferable concept, theme or process at the heart of a subject. It gives meaning and connection to discrete facts and skills.” (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998)

Erickson (2008) demonstrates this point by explaining that there are two types of concepts: the first type arising from the subject material, and the other drawn out of the subject’s craft, the features and processes of the subject. In literature she gives the example of the concepts of family, love, conflict arising out of the themes of literature, whereas other concepts are drawn from the writer’s craft, for example, when character, symbolism, allegory, foreshadowing are used to convey meaning or create effect.

Concepts are not skills; skills are the tools to help students engage with, and respond to, the concepts. In the MYP a significant concept may present itself as a theory, a principle, a generalization, or a process.

When developing a unit, the teacher will start by considering all the concepts that will be taught. By listing these concepts, teachers will reflect upon the underlying (or overarching) concept that they want their students to remember and apply in the long term. Significant concepts can transcend the subject to become macro-concepts, and could possibly be used in other subjects, making for an authentic “interdisciplinary connection” for an MYP unit of study. Where this occurs it provides an opportunity for other subject area teachers to collaborate more easily in the creation of an interdisciplinary unit.

References have been made to the following books.

- Erickson, H.L. 2008. *Stirring the Head, Heart, and Soul*. Thousand Oaks, California. Corwin Press.
- Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. 1998. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, VA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.